

Consumerism and Fear of Death in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

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Abstract

Donald Richard Don DeLillo, a distinctive American writer has published numerous novels, several plays, essays and short stories. Considered as one of the last postmodernists especially with the publication of the novel *White Noise* (1989) Don DeLillo has covered a wide spectrum of subjects ranging from Impact of Television, Nuclear War, Mathematics, Sports, Advent of Digital Age, Economics, Global Terrorism and so on. As a great novelist of his generation he has captured the attention of the readers by his in-depth portrayal of degrading values of American family system through his writings. With the publication of *White Noise* (1989), a representative postmodern novel, DeLillo has highlighted the major theme that death lurks everywhere in the modern world and there is no escape from this harsh reality in spite of the advancements of technology. The novel has effortlessly combined social satire with metaphysical dilemma of the role of family at a time when the meaning of existence is under threat. Ironically the postmodern tendencies he has created in the novel are more prevalent now than in the 80s when he published the novel. The disintegrating family values, fear of death, simulations replacing realities, rampant consumerism, vagueness of identity, waves of radiation and quest for immortality are some of the themes that DeLillo has focused on which a modern reader can relate himself with very easily. DeLillo takes a look at all this with wit and ridicule. Some readers find the satirical portraits of contemporary society harsh and pessimistic but DeLillo has brilliantly navigated the issues with terse prose style and fast paced episodes capturing the interest of the readers.

Keywords: Consumerist Existence, Escapism, Popular Culture, Postmodern American Society, Repent Consumerism, Stream of Random Information

1. Introduction

Postmodernism is a continuation of modernism and at times breaks away from the boundaries of modernism. It deliberately mixes incongruous elements to the point of touching on light hearted parody. Modernist and post-modernist works are structurally fragmented and do not convey a concrete meaning. This in turn leads to ambiguity and multiple interpretations. Undoubtedly postmodern theory has revolutionized all realms of intellectual inquiry and has exerted a considerable influence in the late twentieth century thought after reaching its peak in the 60s and 70s. The period of postmodernism came to an end in the 80s and a new surge of realism evolved which was inspired by Raymond Carver.

2. Don DeLillo as a Postmodern Writer

Donald Richard Don DeLillo, a distinctive American writer has published numerous novels, several plays, essays and short stories. Considered as one of the last postmodernists especially with the publication of the novel *White Noise* (1989) Don DeLillo has covered a wide spectrum of subjects ranging from Impact of Television, Nuclear War, Mathematics, Sports, Advent of Digital Age, Economics, Global Terrorism and so on. As a great novelist of his generation he has captured the attention of the readers by his in-depth portrayal of degrading values of American family system through his writings. With the publication

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3. Perils of Consumerism in the Novel *White Noise*

The protagonist Jack Gladney's life as a University professor is neither heroic nor vile. The novel is divided into three distinct parts namely, 'Waves and Radiation', 'The Airborne Toxic Event' and 'Dylorama'. The titles are quite suggestive of modern day life threats. *White Noise* is a consistent noise that comes out evenly across all hearable frequencies. It is a mechanism that may help some people to sleep soundly. Ironically the portrayal of middle class American family life is more likely to produce contemplation rather than a good night's sleep. The events that are narrated come out as series of noises emanating from a white noise sleeping machine.

Set in the mid west in the 1980s, the novel portrays the lives of Jack Gladney and his wife Babette Gladney who suffer from anxiety and fear of death, death of their own and the death of each other. This fear factor drives them to unimaginable drastic action. In fact all the characters in the novel mention death at one point or other. Jack habitually reads obituaries and finds comfort in the town cemetery. Murray Siskind, his friend compares the supermarket to the book of the death. The idea of death is so deeply rooted in the novel that it can be said that death is the most audible noise in the stream of white noise constantly reminding the characters of their mortality at every stage of their life. The terrifying thought of death is so pervading that Gladney's

son Hendrich draws his father's attention into a conversation that tells the readers how little Gladney is mindful of everyday events, objects and technologies.

Fear of death then leads to uncertainty. Jack becomes so uncomfortable with uncertainty in life persistently questioning the mystery of death like what death will be like and when will it approach him. Murray and his colleagues strive to find answers to various questions relating to death, the academic ruminations which often lead to absurd theories and crazy conclusions. The mystery of death becomes so overwhelming that Murray suggests eventually that Jack should be a killer or kill himself to break the jinx.

DeLillo perhaps is ironical at the way in which academic philosophizing can navigate itself into strange and foolish places often resulting in preposterous and abstract ideas. Overcome by the life's uncertainty, Jack and Murray get entangled in their very ideas they try to explicate. Uncertainty creates more uncertainty and both the characters are caught up in the vicious cycle. All that theoretical speculations have done nothing to detangle their ruminations and only a practical action of killing somebody will break the useless intellectual conjecturing. Jack's analysis of Hitler's character leads him to a new theory that Hitler, the instigator of Holocaust one who propagated death and one who defied death by making himself notoriously popular in the pages of history. Jack looks at him as the ultimate symbol of death. As a professor of history, Jack finds himself hiding behind Hitler's ruthless authority.

From the state of uncertainty the characters then have to find an easy way out to keep their lives going. When the situation turns grim, gripped by the fear of death and uncertainty the characters then turn towards supermarkets. The consumers generally believe that their products help to come out of their desperate situation. The supermarkets are at the center of consumerist existence. Jack Gladney's friend and colleague discuss the existence and significance of supermarkets as follows: "This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's a gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It is full of psychic data"³⁷.

Jack perceives it as a realm of salvation. Jack Gladney and his wife Babette frequently seek shelter in supermarkets whenever they face with the haunting thoughts of their own inevitable death. For them the abundance of products on the shelf comforts them and creates a sense of immortality. This state of mind is juxtaposed with the meaningless life with the constant fear of death. For Jack the cure for anxiety over fear of death is found in consumerism. DeLillo portrays the people in postmodern age retreat to supermarkets as form of escapism from the

harsh realities. It provides a support haven for those people who suffer from neurosis and lack of ideals. Supermarket is almost like a place of worship to perform their weekly ritual. Jack's family achieves oneness in the act of shopping. In the state of shopping frenzy, Jack admits,

I shop with reckless abandon. I shop for immediate needs and distant contingencies. I shopped for its own sake, looking good touching inspecting merchandise. I had no intention of buy, then buying it¹ (84).

A sense of power overtakes him amidst the white noise emanating from the supermarket:

Voices rose ten storey from the gardens and promenades, a roar that echoed and swirled through the vast gallery, mixing with noises from the fears, with shuffling feet and chiming bells, the hum of escalators, the sound of people eating, the human buzz of some vivid and happy transaction¹(84).

However, the comforting consumerism is transient as it can be seen from the two supermarket visits. Jack falls into the bottomless dwellings of death. DeLillo seems to suggest that consumerism in the postmodern age cannot cure all their afflictions. Their escapist behavioral patterns are deeper than their shopping euphoria. '...in silence the family members go to their respective rooms, wishing to be alone'¹(84).

Living in the midst of technological devices, the characters are constantly bombarded by conflicting media reports which make them all the more difficult to separate reality from illusion. In other words the ceaseless stream of random information makes it difficult to determine what is actually real. DeLillo is obviously ironical of the difficulties in navigating the information in postmodern era and how the people are easily influenced by popular culture. The third part of the novel that deals with the Airborne Toxic Event is a candid illustration of the chaotic predicament. There is a dangerous sense of insecurity even though the people are surrounded by technological devices. They are driven towards a situation where they are unable to discern the genuine from the fabricated.

4. Conclusion

Everyday life is constantly bombarded with brand names, advertisements which are repeated in a loop, forever capturing the fragile minds of the consumers. These thoughts find their way into everyday conversations that take place in Gladney's household. Jack is a telling example of a person caught in the consumer society who with a tendency to attribute metaphysical meanings to ordinary things, "The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder"¹ (155). The novel's message therefore is that consumerism is hopeless, elusive and empty. It is never a remedy to treat the fear of death or solve the puzzle of uncertainty. The *White noise* that is supposed to lead them to comfort zone instead leads them to a panic stricken life in postmodern society. Francis Fukuyama in his *The End of History* crisply sums up the reality of American society in the following words:

The worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination and idealism will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands².

Mass consumption is common place today. Unfortunately the entire shopping craze is deeply rooted in a society conditioned by the corporations. An ignorant citizen is made to believe that happiness lies in purchases. The telling message is that happiness cannot be purchased at a store. Happiness lies in being content with the possessions. As DeLillo has pointed out that buying something is not going to solve the problems. Therefore it is better to choose to act responsibly with the resources and intentionally live within the means.

5. References

1. DeLillo D. *White Noise*. Penguin Group USA. 1986.
2. Fukuyama F. *The End of history*. National Affairs Incorporated. 1989; 16:3–18.